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Ex-agent criticizes CIA in speech at U of L

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When Ralph McGehee was a CIA agent in Thailand in 1967, he was told to devise a plan to quell an insurgency by 2,000 anti-government guerrillas believed scattered over about half the country.

In his first attempt, McGehee dispatched 17 helicopters carrying Thai national police to a suspected enemy hotbed, which turned out to be an empty rice paddy.

"Very embarrassing," he said yesterday at the University of Louisville during a speech to some 200 people about his 25 years with the CIA.

Later, McGehee said, he discovered evidence of 2,000 guerrillas in a single province, strongly supported by the local population and hostile to the American-supported government of Thailand.

The implications did not please his superiors, McGehee said, and his report was suppressed. His career as a maverick in the agency began soon after.

McGehee said he tried unsuccessfully to fight the system from the inside until he left the agency in

1977. Since then he has written a book and spoken extensively in the United States and abroad about the CIA.

The agency's purpose is not, he contends, to gather intelligence but to manipulate information in support of American foreign policy.

In Thailand, Vietnam, Angola, El Salvador, Grenada, Nicaragua and elsewhere, the CIA has fabricated information about Communist subversion to justify American intervention and the creation of American-supported regimes, he said.

"I don't think we can long go on letting the CIA go around the world destroying life, liberty, happiness ... and long expect democracy to survive in this America," McGehee said.

McGehee said that before his book, "Deadly Deceits," was published in 1983, the CIA tried to suppress it, saying it divulged classified information.

No hostile questions were asked by the near-capacity crowd at the auditorium in the Bingham Humanities Building at U of L's Belknap Campus.

However, after the lecture, some audience members debated whether McGehee gave an accurate portrayal of the CIA's role.

One, Bill Danielczyk, said that, while much of what McGehee said may be true, it was not balanced with information about the sins of other nations.